DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 261 840 RC 015 481

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TITLE Building Partnerships for Quality Education in Rural America: The School Board/School Program Partnership.
PUB DATE Jun 84
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the National Conference or Building Partnerships for Quality Education in Rural America (Washington, DC, June 28, 1984). For a related document, see ED 247 072.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Board Administrator Relationship; Board of Education Role; *Boards of Education; Educational Cooperation; Elementary Secondary Education; Interdistrict Policies; Regional Cooperation; Rural Education; *Rural Schools; School Activities; *School Administration; *School Community Relationship
IDENTIFIERS Indiana; *Partnerships

ABSTRACT

A partnership involving eight rural school districts in Indiana developed out of the need for a cooperative services organization to communicate with its school board members. A Joint Services Cooperative Committee composed of one or two school board members from each district visits classes, reviews program policies, and keeps fellow board members informed. An annual briefing is held for all board members to review programs, inspect equipment, and meet school personnel. Such a partnership of rural school boards and school personnel expands the board's role from concern with physical and fiscal aspects of schooling to decisions about programs and appreciation of daily instructional needs. The partnership fosters trust, enhances communication, encourages information exchange, reduces levels of stress, instills a sense of participation, presents a positive image to school and community, and is in the students' best interest. Partnerships are often difficult to maintain, require careful personal attention, must preserve line-staff relationships, and must be flexible, open, professional, operational, and comfortable for members. Partnerships represent the best use of local resources and strengthen local education support systems, important steps to improving the quality of rural education. (LFL)

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Rec'd 10/17/85

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Building Partnerships For Quality Education In Rural America

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The School Board / School Program Partnership

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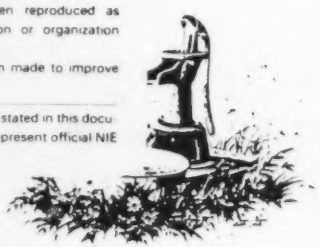

A NATIONAL CONFERENCE
ON RURAL EDUCATION
June, 1984
Washington, D.C.

RC015481

A PARTNERSHIP, simply put is a joint interest or association between persons in pursuit of a common goal . . .

An Overview:

Changing Rural Education presents us with futuristic challenges! District consolidations have expanded yesterday's small township schools into newer, larger, more complex learning centers. Not only are 67% of our nation's schools classified as rural, but 33% of school-age youngsters are also currently attending them, according to a recent U.S. office report.

With the disappearance of the old school house and its replacement by more sophisticated learning centers, rural school boards became occupied with decision-making processes concerning costs, management and maintenance. Little time was left for program planning.

To improve this situation a "Partnership" was developed to enhance the quality of education in our schools.

We'd like to tell you that our idea is perfect — but it's not. We'd like to think that our Partnership always works smoothly — but it doesn't. It's probably not even original because it seems to be too practical. We can assure you that it's hard work, time consuming and sometimes just plain discouraging. Despite a rough spot here or there, this Partnership has been worth the time and effort.

The Partnership was developed out of frustration. It was formed in an effort to keep in touch with school boards concerning on-going program needs. Prior to the Partnership arrangement some doubt existed in our minds about the role and effectiveness of school boards. It seemed to us that their time and interests were only directed toward physical and fiscal aspects of schooling. As we began to work with them in the Partnership, we found an interest in programs and an appreciation of daily instruction.

Let us not discount the rural school board nor their interest in the improvement of education. We have about the same number of professionals, tradespeople and contributing citizens who make up the composure of any board. The typical rural board member is young, educated and involved in community affairs. When properly involved and adequately briefed, this new breed responds well to changes and improvements. We feel that most rural boards would be receptive to a Partnership if properly formed and professionally maintained.

The Rationale For A Partnership:

We have only to read a part or portion of *A Nation At Risk*, An Open Letter to the American People, to sense the urgency to improve local schools. If we miss the idea that there exists a widespread public perception that something is seriously remiss in our educational system, then we might also discount the need and value of a Partnership. The best use of local resources and the strengthening of support systems in education is of interest to us.

We view the school board as a positive, strong and primary support system in our rural schools, thus the value of a Partnership. Although the term "Partnership" is not readily found in print concerning the work of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, reference is made to the concept of a Partnership. Various reports allude to such terms as support, communication, commitment and reaffirmation to excellence in our schools. The Rationale for the Partnership we propose concerns clear commitments, better levels of communication and a very serious effort to strive toward excellence in local education.

There are many sensible reasons why a Partnership of this nature should exist in our schools. We have found that this working relationship fosters trust. It enhances communication. It encourages the exchange of information upon which "best decisions" are made by local school boards. A working Partnership reduces levels of stress, instills a sense of participation and presents a positive image to both school and community. Perhaps the single most important reason for a School Board / School Program Partnership is that it is in the student's best interest.

Developing The Partnership:

It matters little, really, how the partnership is formed: whether formal, informal, in print, or simply agreed upon by the parties involved. The idea, the concept and basis for a Partnership is to open lines of communication between school district policy makers (Board) and responsible school personnel who manage and maintain educational programs. Our Partnership developed out of the necessity to communicate with board members of eight rural school districts that we serve. In July, at the time of school board reorganization, each Board President appoints one or two members to the Joint Services Cooperative Committee. These "partners" are then kept informed about the business of the Cooperative. They are encouraged to visit classes, talk with parents, review program policies and work with us in areas of need. Each is given ample opportunity to become acquainted with both the usual and unusual in day-to-day programming. The explicit purpose of this working Partnership, is to inform individual board members, who in turn share accurate information with their fellow members.

To further implement this Partnership, an annual briefing is held for all school board members of the eight districts. These members receive a review of program, inspect various kinds of equipment, meet school personnel and receive thanks and encouragement for their support of Cooperative Education. It is a time dedicated to the Partnership and its purpose. (Board members from the combine of districts can be overheard talking about finance, busses, bids, roofs, fuel costs and other school related topics, and that's okay . . . because we know those things are also important.)

If this all sounds exciting, it is! If it seems like work, it's that too! It would surely be easier to go day to day without sharing. The benefits of board inclusion far out-weigh "going it alone." We could run things to suit ourselves and our convenience. However, complying to minimums is simply not our purpose. If it were, we wouldn't be encouraging others to share interests, responsibilities and techniques to improve the quality of our public school program.

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The Partnership In Action:

The Partnership allows and encourages the smooth flow of needed and necessary information to the entire board through a board representative. The magnitude of action in this partnership would seem to depend upon the creativity of key school personnel and the amount of interest, trust and utilization of the Partnership by the board.

Rural Education Needs Attention:

A recent publicaion draws attention to a great range of needs in our rural schools. The article *Addressing The Report Of The Commission On Excellence In Education . . . From The Rural Perspective*, suggests that poverty levels are higher in rural schools than in non-rural ones, and that more handicapped children are enrolled in rural education. Population growth, lack of tax base, costly transportation, staffing inadequacies, inexperienced teachers and teacher certification was likewise cited as needing immediate attention if the quality of rural education was to improve. Realizing that these needs do exist it would be a good time to form a Partnership. Neither responsible school people nor interested board members can long ignore these needs in rural Education.

In Retrospect:

Our Partnership guarantees no shelter from serious educational problems. It has no magic about it in an operational sense. It's hard work, often difficult to maintain and requires careful personal attention. It does, however, both insure and assure open communication, counsel and valuable support in problem solving. The full use of a Partnership fosters the development of new ideas, the encouragement of better practices, and the evaluation of programs. It is not a concept that can be forced. It works best when thought useful by all parties concerned. The Partnership must be flexible, open, professional, operational and comfortable for its membership.

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—NOTES—

In Consideration of the Partnership:

- The Partnership should be understood by those involved
- Line-staff relationships must be kept
- Work through and with the District School Superintendent
- Use the Partnership to improve the quality of local programs
- Maintain flexibility in the Partnership

Presented in Washington
at
The National Conference
On Rural Education
June, 1984

by

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